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ABSTRACT

THIS RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED AS A TEST OF THE ASSERTION THAT THE TERM "WHITE" HAS CONSISTENTLY POSITIVE CONNOTATIONS IN OUR SOCIETY, AND THAT "BLACK" ALWAYS HAS NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS. THE RESPONSES OF TWO GROUPS OF NINTH GRADERS TO ADJECTIVES WERE STUDIED IN A CORRELATIONAL DESIGN BY MEANS OF AN INFORMALLY DERIVED SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL SCALE. ADJECTIVES CONSIDERED SOCIALLY DESIREABLE AND SOCIALLY UNDESIREABLE WERE RANKED ON A CONTINUUM WITH THE EXTREMES BEING WHITE AND BLACK. RESULTS INDICATED A NEAR PERFECT CONSISTENCY IN ASSIGNMENT OF SOCIALLY DESIREABLE TRAITS TO THE LIGHTER CATEGORIES AND UNDESIREABLE TRAITS TO THE DARKER CATEGORIES. INTERPRETATION FOR THE CAUSES OF THIS EVALUATIVE ASSYMETRY OF BLACK AND WHITE WILL HAVE TO AWAIT FURTHER RESEARCH, ESPECIALLY ANALYSIS OF DATA FROM BLACK RESPONDENTS. (KJ)

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Semantic Differential Responses to "Black", "White", and Related Verbal Stimuli*

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In a public address entitled "The Negro Revolt Re-visited" (delivered in 1966), the author-scholar Louis Lomax asserted that the term "white" has consistently positive symbolic connotations in our society, and that "black" always has negative connotations. This research was conducted as a test of this assertion.

The responses of two groups of ninth graders to adjectives were studied in a correlational design by means of an informally derived Semantic Differential Scale. The first group (N = 29) responded to a list of forty adjectives, composed of twenty bipolar pairs. Half the adjectives were judged, on an informal, a priori basis, to be representative of "socially desirable" traits (e.g., clean, honest). And the other twenty adjectives were judged to represent "socially undesirable" traits (e.g., dirty, dishonest). There was unanimous agreement by three researchers as to the direction of the dichotomous classification of each adjective. For each adjective, Ss checked one of five scale positions varying in brightness: black and white were anchors, with three intermediate shades of gray. Results indicated a near perfect consistency in assignment of socially desirable traits to the lighter categories, and undesirable traits to the darker categories.

A second group of ninth graders (N = 35) responded to the same list of forty adjectives by checking for each adjective its position on a seven-point scale designated only by the anchor terms "socially desirable" and "socially undesirable." Again, median scale position for each adjective was computed.

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These results, too, showed nearly perfect agreement in assignment of socially desirable and undesirable traits to the corresponding halves of the response continuum. (See Fig. 1, 9th Grade).

Results

1. Statistical analysis of ranked median adjective ratings on the two scales yielded a Spearman Rank-Difference correlation of .82 ($p < .001$).
2. Subsequent replication with two independent groups of west coast college students yielded $r_s = .86$ ($p < .001$) between ratings of the forty adjectives on the two scales.
3. A comparison of 9th grade and college students ratings of each adjective on the Social Desirability scale yielded $r_s = .97$, and $r_s = .95$ for the Black-White scale comparison.
4. Results from further studies using Osgood's traditional SD dimensions of Evaluative Potency, and Activity for rating the concepts Black, White, Socially Desirable, Socially Undesirable, Sincere and Liar supported the hypothesis that White would receive more favorable ratings than Black. Also, SD profiles based on ratings of Black and White by two independent college groups showed a high degree of correspondence.
5. Data from an eastern college student group replicated results from the west coast.

Discussion

Interpretation for the causes of this evaluative assymetry of black and white will have to await further research, especially analysis of data from black respondents. Tentative hypotheses to be explored include first, Hebb's concept of fear as a function of change in familiar stimuli, secondly, the learning of evaluative tendencies via black-white symbolic referents in literature, and third, the possibility that a fear of darkness may generalize to human beings with dark skin.

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TABLE I

Forty adjectives rated on Socially Desirable-Undesirable and Black-White scales by 9th grade & college students

9th Grade				College			
Ranking:				Ranking:			
Socially Desirable		White		Socially Desirable		White	
1	clean	1	clean	1	honest	1	clean
2.5	friendly	2	happy	2	happy	2	happy
2.5	honest	3	honest	3	life	3.5	light
4	kind	4	kind	4	kind	3.5	honest
5	happy	5	innocent	5	friendly	5.5	innocent
6	pleasant	6	intelligent	6	clean	5.5	beautiful
7.5	life	7	light	7	intelligent	7	good
7.5	beautiful	8	friendly	8	pleasant	8	friendly
9	polite	9.5	good	9	polite	9	life
10.5	good	9.5	beautiful	10	good	10	kind
10.5	intelligent	11	superior	11	employed	11	right
12	ambitious	12	right	12	beautiful	12	polite
13	lucky	13	pleasant	13	ambitious	13	pleasant
14	careful	14	lucky	14	careful	14	lucky
15	right	15	ambitious	15	right	15	careful
16	employed	16	employed	16	innocent	16	ambitious
17	innocent	17	careful	17	light	17.5	superior
18.5	dark*	18	polite	18	lucky	17.5	employed
18.5	light	19	life	19	dark*	19	intelligent
20	superior	20	stupid*	20	master	20	master
21	sad	21	lazy	21	sad	21	stupid
22	unlucky	22	inferior	22	superior*	22	lazy
23	guilty	23	master*	23	unlucky	23	careless
24.5	wrong	24	sad	24	wrong	24	unemployed
24.5	unemployed	25	careless	25	unemployed	25	inferior
26	inferior	26	unlucky	26	ugly	26	sad
27	master*	27	impolite	27	guilty	27	unlucky
28	careless	28	unpleasant	28	careless	28	unpleasant
29	bad	29	dirty	29	lazy	29	wrong
30	lazy	30	unemployed	30	inferior	30	impolite
31.5	stupid	31	ugly	31	stupid	31	ugly
31.5	ugly	32	bad	32	impolite	32	unfriendly
33	unfriendly	33	wrong	33	unpleasant	33	bad
34	unpleasant	34	unfriendly	34	bad	34	guilty
35	impolite	35.5	cruel	35	unfriendly	35	dirty
36	death	35.5	dishonest	36	death	36	dishonest
37	cruel	37.5	guilty	37	dirty	37	dark
38.5	slave	37.5	dark	38	dishonest	38	death
38.5	dishonest	39	slave	39	slave	39	cruel
40	dirty	40	death	40	cruel	40	slave
Socially Undesirable		Black		Socially Undesirable		Black	

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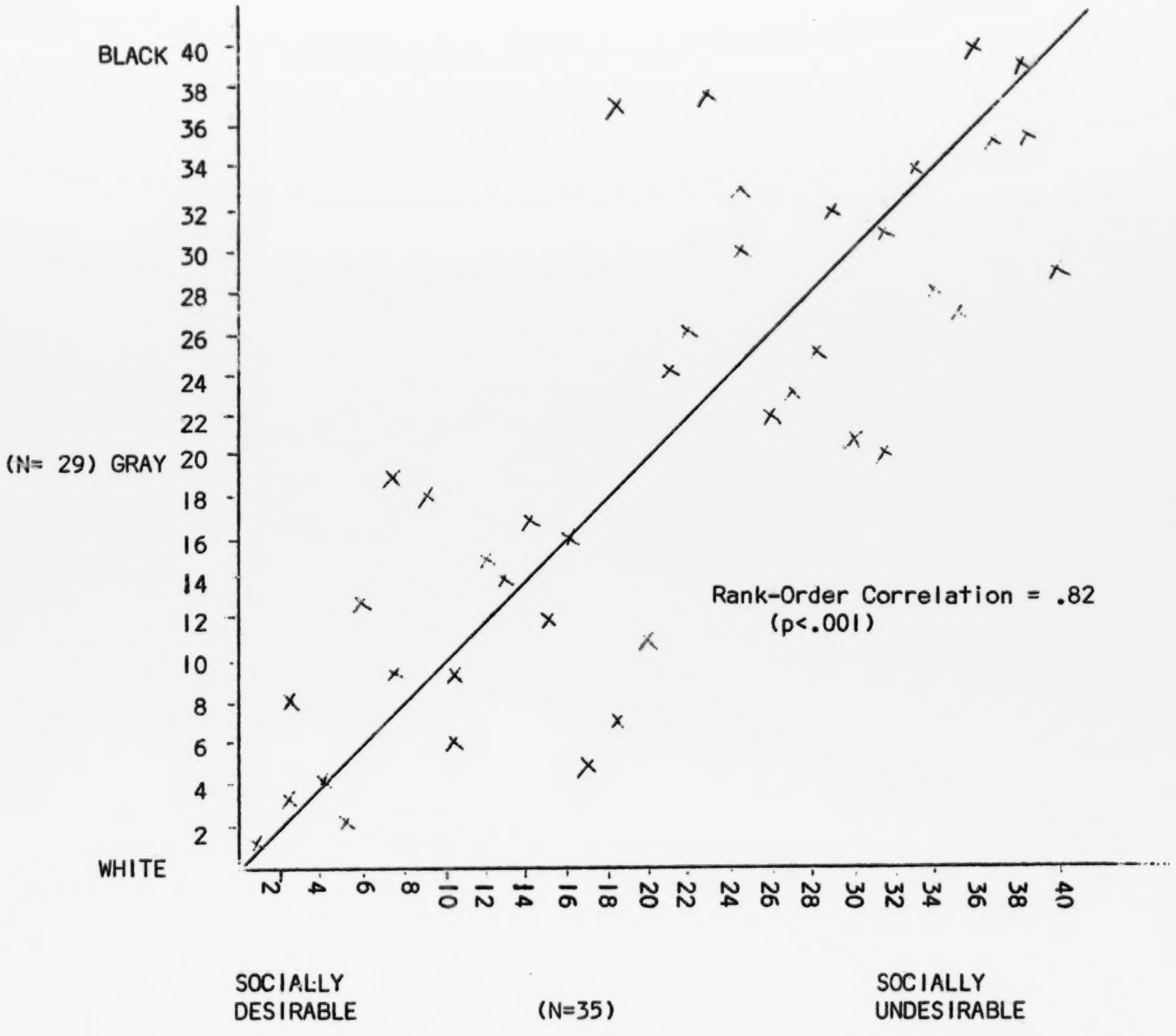

Fig. 1. Rank-order correlation of 9th grade subjects' ratings of forty adjectives on Socially Desirable-Undesirable and Black-White rating scales.

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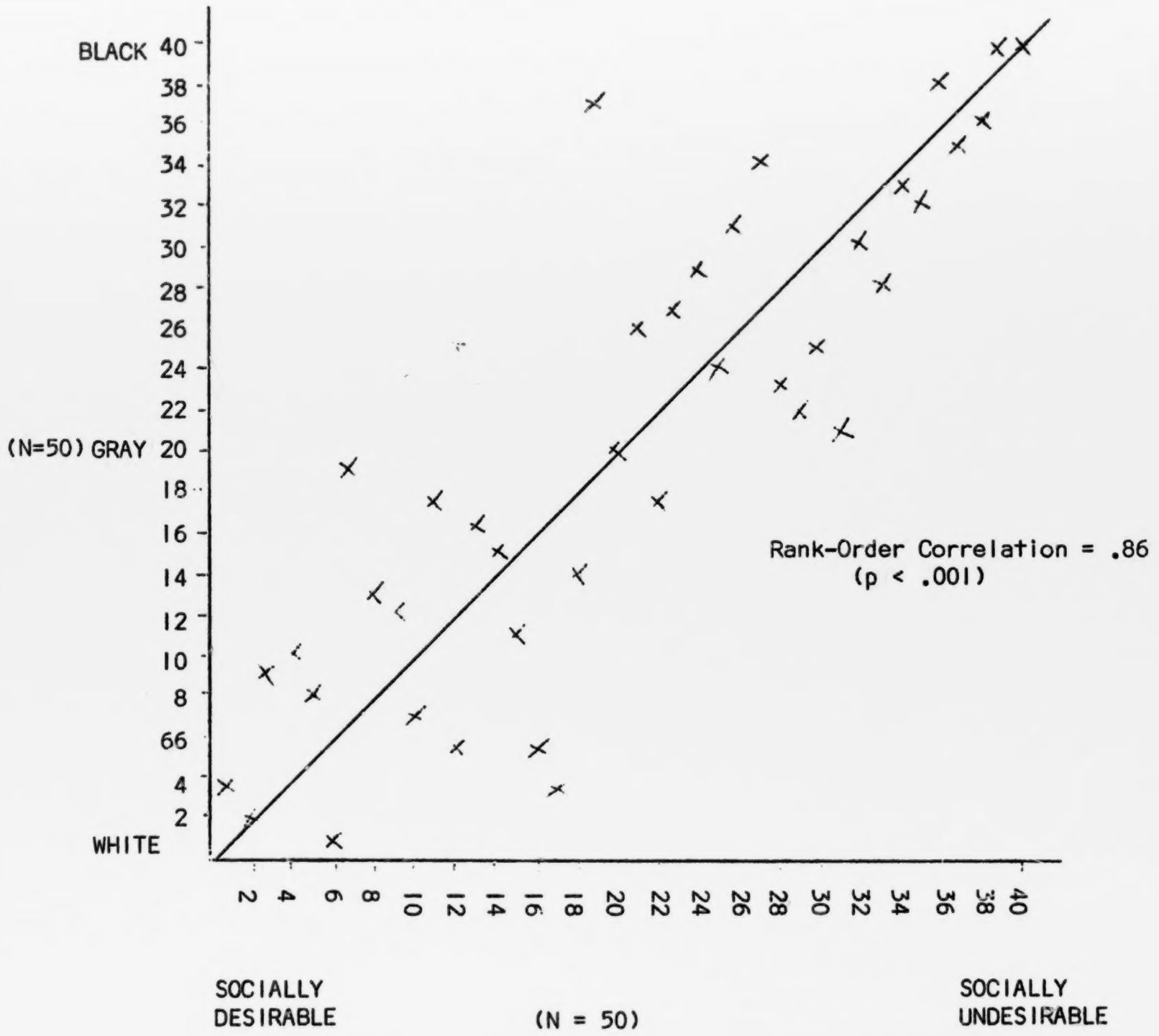

Fig. 2. Rank-order correlation of college subjects' ratings of forty adjectives on Socially Desirable-Undesirable and Black-White rating scales.

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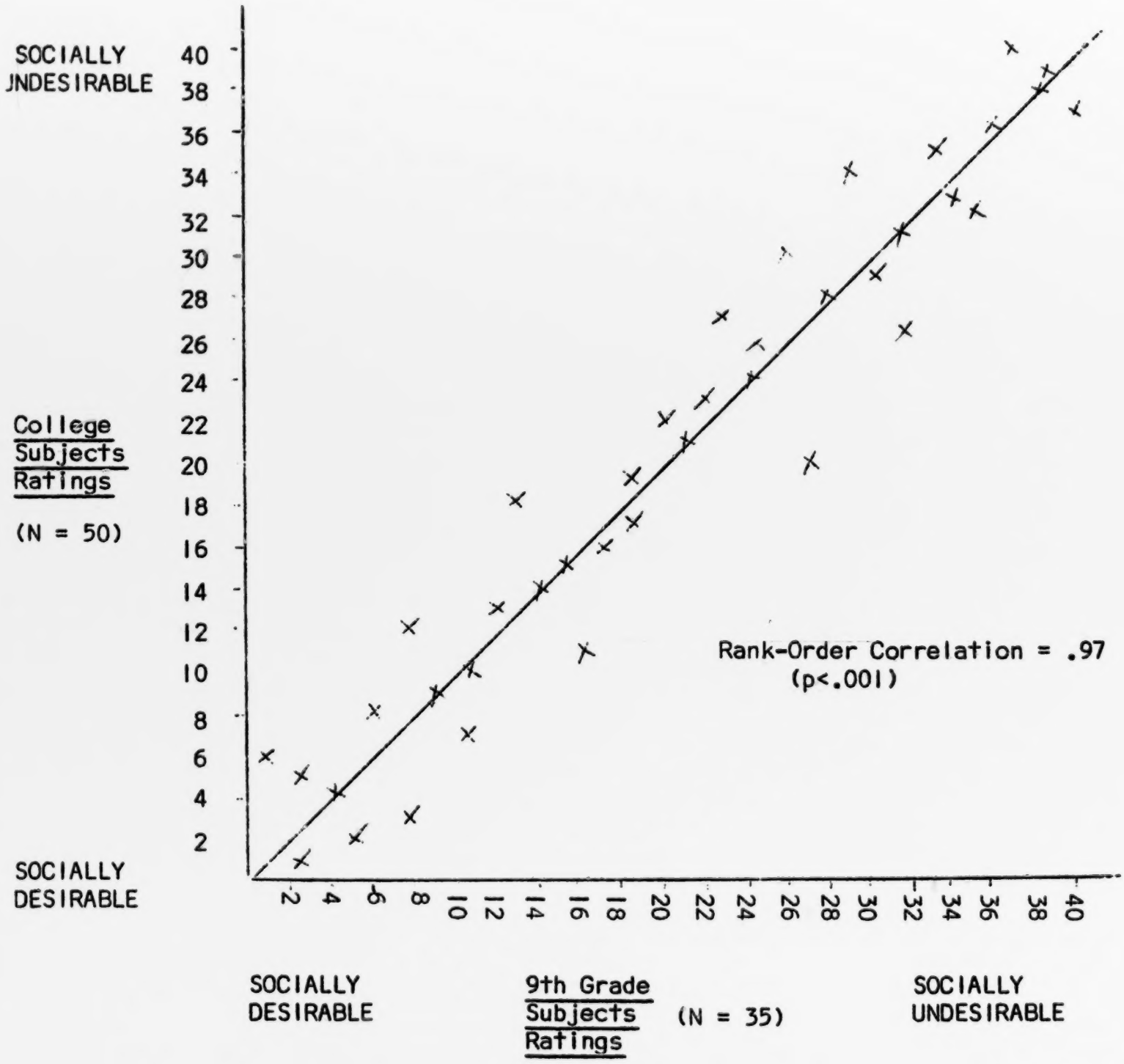

Fig. 3. Rank-order correlation of 9th grade and college subjects' ratings for forty adjectives on a Socially Desirable-Undesirable scale.

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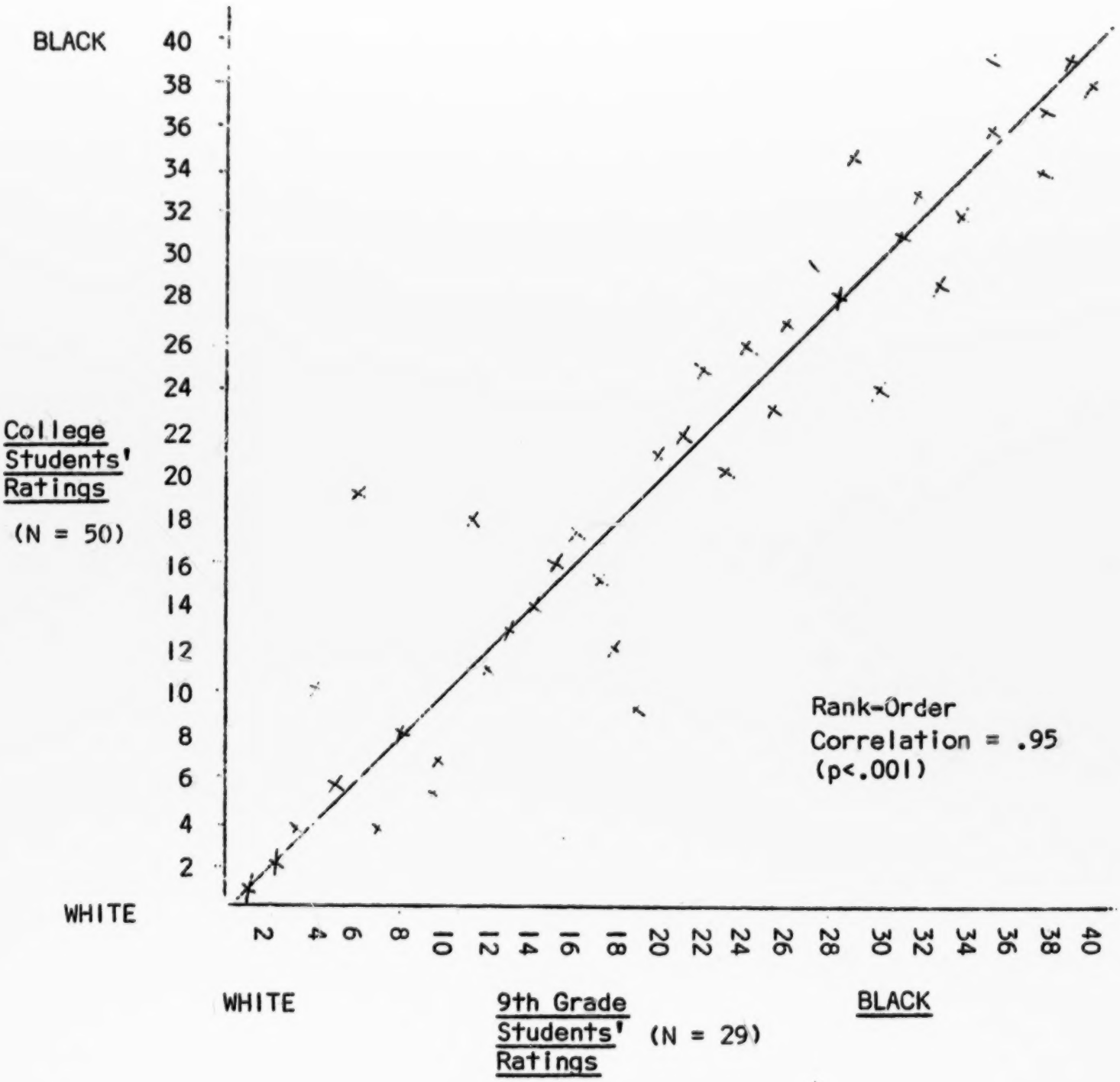

Fig. 4. Rank-order correlation of 9th grade and college students' ratings for forty adjectives on a Black-White scale.

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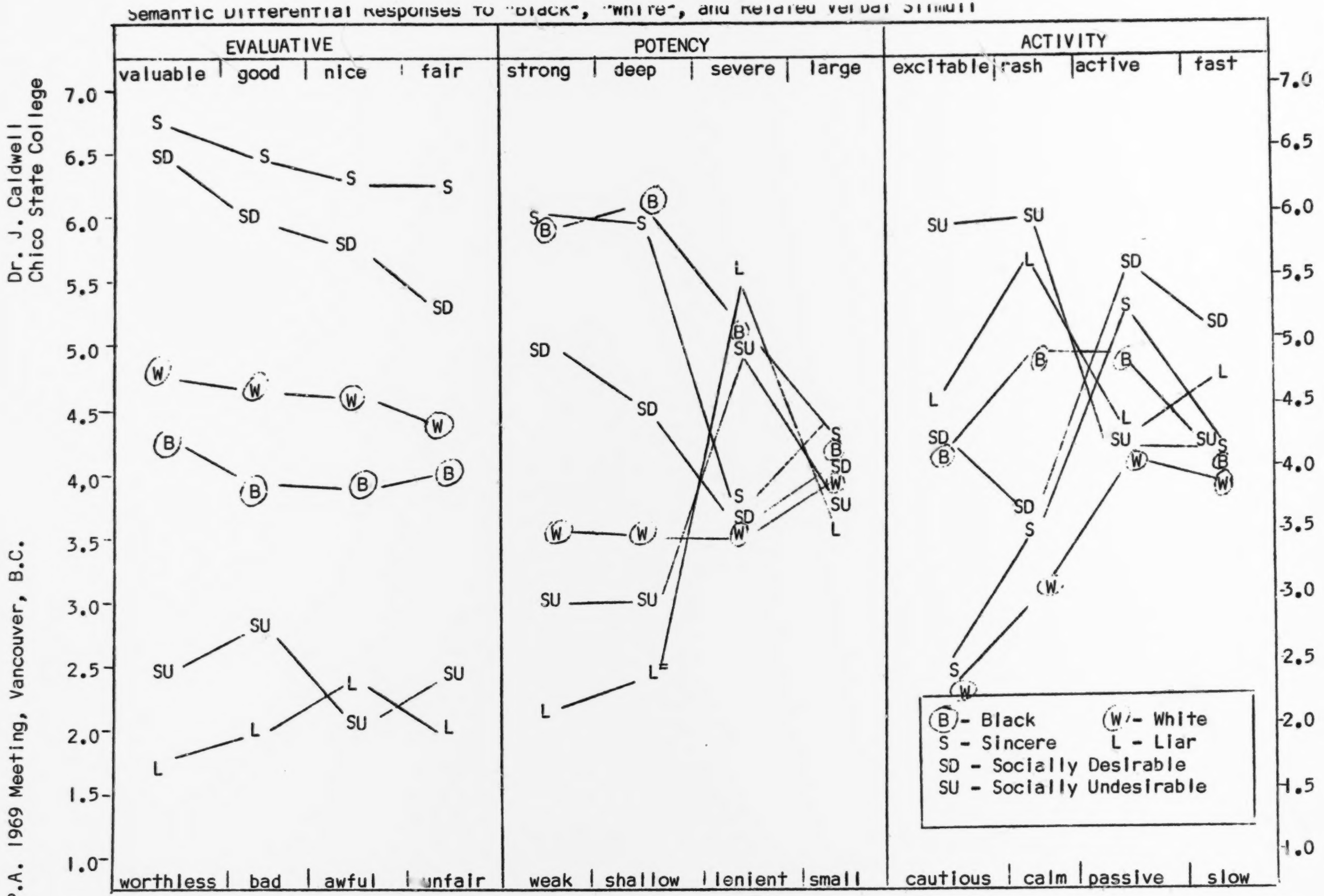

Fig. 5. College students' SD ratings of Black, White, Sincere, Liar, Socially Desirable, Socially Undesirable. (N = 29)

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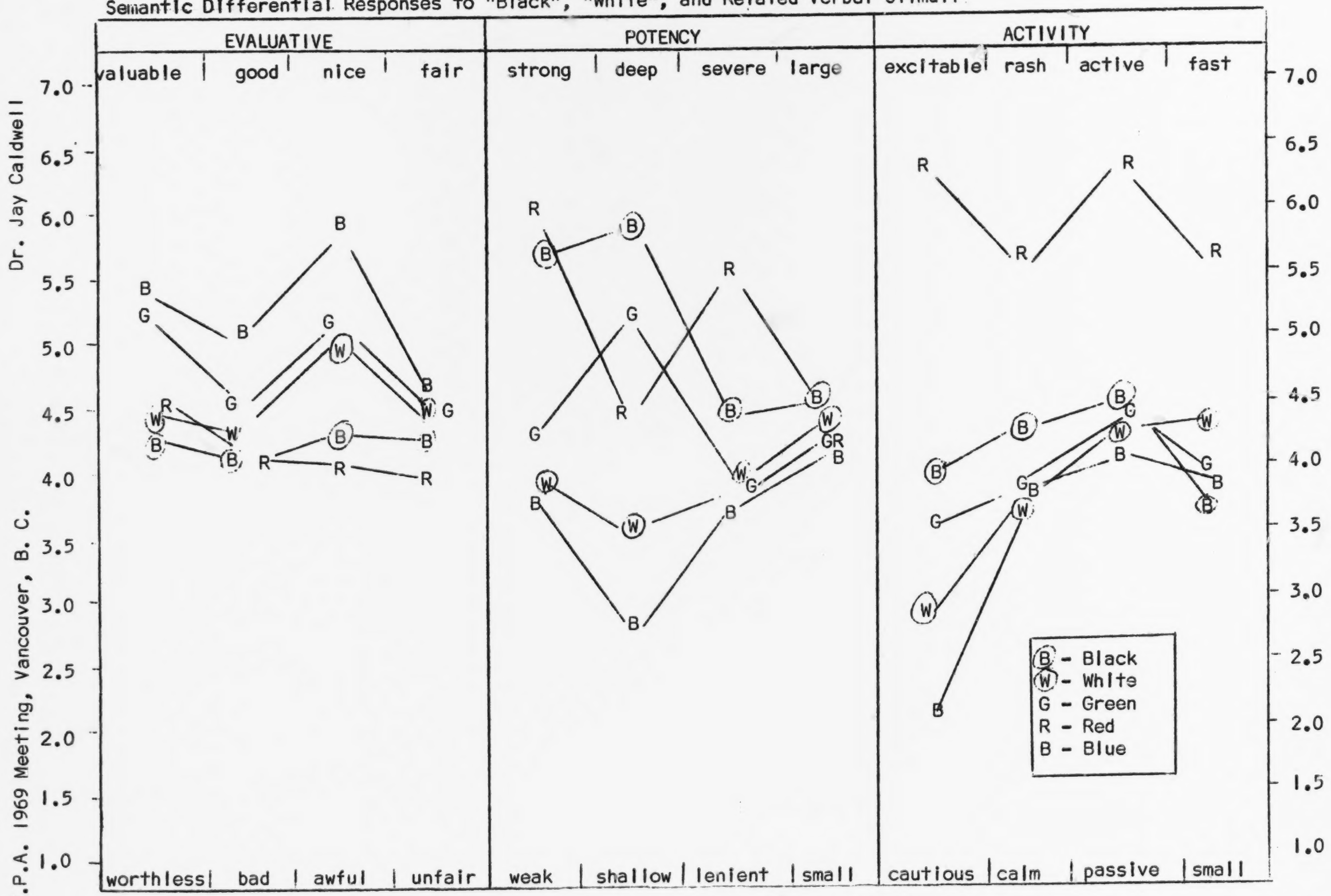

Fig. 6. College students' responses to Black, White, Green, Red, Blue (N = 30)

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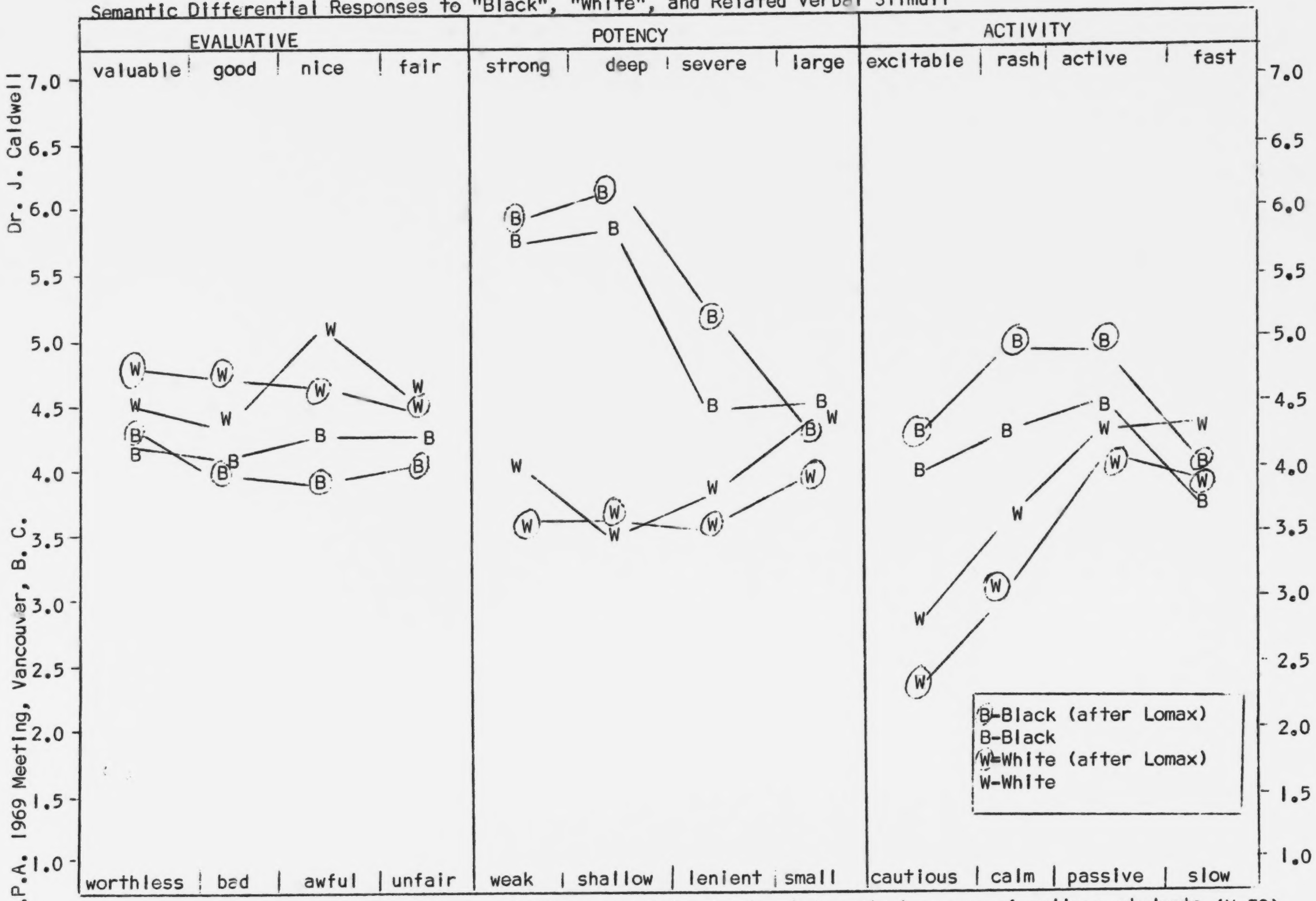

Fig. 7. Comparison of SD responses to Black and White by two independent groups of college students.(N=59)